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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RABAT 001118

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/MAG AND DRL

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TAGS: [KPKO](#) [MO](#) [PBTS](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#)

SUBJECT: WESTERN SAHARA: POLICE USE VIOLENCE TO PUT DOWN DEMONSTRATIONS

Classified By: Political Officer Peter Chisholm for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Embassy contacts in Laayoune confirm news reports that significant demonstrations have taken place in Laayoune between May 21-25. More than twenty persons have reportedly been arrested and as many are reported to be injured, some seriously. Large numbers of police and military were deployed on the streets of Laayoune, but MINURSO reports the demonstrations have mostly died down, though the atmosphere in Laayoune remains charged. End Summary.

¶2. (C) MINURSO Chief of Staff Philippe Elghouayel told A/DCM May 27 that the demonstrations started after Moroccan authorities decided to transfer a Sahrawi prisoner from Laayoune jail to a prison in Agadir (southern Morocco). Relatives and tribesmen of the inmate gathered at the gates of the jail to protest the move, since moving the prisoner to Agadir would mean less contact with relatives and that the prisoner was being moved out of Sahrawi territory and into Morocco proper. Elghouayel said what began as a small mostly tribal protest turned more overtly political as pro-Polisario elements joined in. The demonstrations were not continuous he said but generally started around 9 pm and lasted until midnight, from May 22-26. Elghouayel said a MINURSO vehicle inadvertently drove past a crowd of demonstrators at one point and was pelted with stones. Polisario flags were on display, and the crowd was chanting pro-Polisario slogans.

Charged Atmosphere

¶3. (C) Elghouayel said that press reports (including on al-Jazeera) characterizing the demonstrations as an "intifada" were overblown, and even pro-Polisario elements were not couching the activity as such. MINURSO had no information that the Polisario had called for an "intifada." He was not surprised at the demonstrations, however, given the charged atmosphere in Laayoune. He said several recent developments had inflamed the atmosphere: on May 17, the Polisario launched an international tender for offshore oil and gas exploration, declaring that this decision was prompted by "the inevitable independence" of the territory; on May 21, the Polisario celebrated its 32 anniversary, with Bouteflika's now well-known letter reaffirming Algerian support for Saharan independence; and on May 24 King Mohammed announced his decision to pull out of the Arab Maghreb Union summit.

¶4. (C) In a written report to DPKO shared with Embassy Rabat, MINURSO notes that "the underlining tension can be felt, in particular the pro-Polisario sentiment amongst local Saharans. Because of the overriding tribal characteristics of the local population, the prevailing discontent seems confined within a specific group, although a general feeling of discontent does exist because of social hardship, unemployment, and discrimination. The discontent, although rising, will likely not translate into civil unrest, despite consistent attempts to make it more widespread."

Pro-Polisario Views

¶5. (C) President of the Association for the Victims of the Violations of Human Rights Committed by the Moroccan State Driss Dahan provided his version of events to Poloff on May

¶6. He said that a number of protesters were arrested during four days of protests involving several thousand demonstrators in neighborhoods throughout the city of Laayoune, including Mattala, Al Quds, Smarra, Sci Kimma, and Sharia Tan Tan. Dahan said there has been a general feeling of frustration for months with the lack of progress towards a political solution to the Sahara issue and there have been several demonstrations involving hundreds of protesters since December. The larger demonstrations began four days ago when police tried to transfer a Sahrawi prisoner El Hadi Ahmed Mouhoud (alias Al-Karnan) from a jail in Laayoune to a facility in Agadir in southern Morocco. Al Karnan reportedly tried to resist the prison transfer, renounced his Moroccan citizenship and was beaten by police. Word of the incident spread out of the Laayoune jail four days ago and large-scale

protests began the same day, according to Dahan. Serious police repression began two days ago when authorities attempted to arrest one demonstration leader, El Koutoub El Hadith El Hafed, at his home two days ago. Protesters, eventually numbering more than one thousand, staged a sit-in in front of El Koutoub's house. Police reportedly dispersed the demonstrators, arrested 38 protesters, and injured 20 persons, including seven persons who were seriously injured, according to Dahan. One man who carried a POLISARIO flag was badly beaten, arrested and tortured in jail, Dahan alleged. Some Sahrawis saw the injured man in the hospital, and Dahan said police later used the man to negotiate with protesters.

16. (SBU) POLFSN called another Sahrawi contact, Mohamed Daha, who said police struck him in the head during a May 25 demonstration. Daha said fewer Sahrawis were arrested (about 20), but he confirmed a report also provided by Dahan, that police have detained the entire family belonging to one Mohamed Al Araby. Daha said no curfew has been announced, but police are behaving as if there is a curfew and chasing people off the streets by 6 pm. Both men said that groups of Moroccan settlers are marching around neighborhoods chanting provocative slogans with police escorts. Both said that demonstrators negotiated with police to hold a one-hour sit-in in front of the courthouse on May 26. Both men said the demonstrations, the violent police response and the tension in the city closely resemble the tense situation in the territory in 1999, that led to severe police repression. Dahan asked for the Embassy to intervene with Moroccan authorities to permit Sahrawis to have a time and place for political demonstrations in order to air their grievances and to let off steam. He said a violent confrontation between police and the civilian population was in no one's interest at this time.

Where Have All the Young Men Gone?

17. (C) Elghouayel noted separately that political activity in the Tindouf camps appears to have heated up as well. He said there was a rise in "passionate speeches" from younger residents in the lead-up to the 32nd anniversary celebrations. Since about that time, though, Elghouayel says almost all of the adult male residents of the Tindouf camps have departed. While this happens every year around the time of the Polisario anniversary, Elghouayel thought it unusual that the men had not yet returned. Elghouayel lamented that Polisario restrictions on MINURSO movements prevented MINURSO peacekeepers from investigating the situation more thoroughly. He added that MINURSO troops had also noted movements of Polisario military vehicles toward the south.

EU Interest

18. (C) Dutch DCM Caroline Vejiers called A/DCM May 27 to seek information on the demonstrations, noting that as EU president the Dutch were interested in what was taking place and would review the situation with EU colleagues in Rabat.

Comment

19. (C) The Polisario appear to be flexing their muscles, reminding the Moroccans and the international community they are alive and well. The timing of these demonstrations can be no coincidence, given the renewed tension between Morocco and Algeria. While we have no reason to believe a return to armed struggle is imminent or even being seriously contemplated (and nor does MINURSO), the Polisario clearly wants to demonstrate that they are still a force to be reckoned with and that they cannot be marginalized without consequences. Along those lines, we note that Polisario President Abdulaziz wrote to the Security Council May 26 to request help in "protecting the Sahrawi population repressed by Morocco." We have also seen press reports of clashes between Sahrawi students and Moroccan security forces on a Rabat university campus on May 27 which we are investigating.

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